

Digest of Higher Education Issues

Our office was asked by Representative Bill Wright to address a number of issues in higher education. Unfortunately, our research found insufficient data to adequately address most of the questions raised by Representative Wright. Moreover, we have concerns with some of the data that does exist because of weaknesses in the data collection process. We found that a great deal of the available data relies on self-reporting mechanisms in the data collection process. Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings, we have attempted to provide as much information as possible on each question.

Higher education officials report that beginning in 1997, in accordance with the federal Right to Know Act, colleges and universities across the nation will begin reporting comprehensive studies using newly adopted uniform data collection procedures. Officials from the Board of Regents indicated that information on the number of entering freshmen that graduate, the number of years needed to graduate, the number of students that temporarily stop-out of school, and other relevant information is in the process of being gathered. Overall, we feel the best option may be to wait for the results of these studies to see if they adequately address Representative Wright's concerns.

Our review of the number of freshmen that complete a 4-year degree found limited data. Colleges and universities report the number of students that graduate annually; however, there are currently insufficient reporting and tracking mechanisms to accurately document the number of freshmen in a given class that eventually complete a degree. A few attempts have been made to track freshmen cohorts but the studies have used dissimilar reporting methods and of too short a duration to be useful.

Regarding the employment and salary level of those who do not complete a degree. None of the state's colleges and universities track dropouts. School officials report that it would be too costly both in terms of time and resources to track the employment history of dropouts.

Our review of the costs incurred by the state when students dropout of school after a few semesters found very limited data. The best available data from the Utah System of Higher Education shows that the direct cost of instruction per FTE student is \$1,790 per year for lower division courses and that the full cost of instruction per FTE student is \$4,098 per year for lower division courses.

We contacted four schools for information on the percentage of graduates that find full-time employment in their field of study. Of the four institutions contacted, only three track the employment history of graduates. USU reported that 63 percent of their 1994 graduates found full-time employment (56% in a related field). WSU reported that 46 percent of their 1994 graduates found full-time employment (37% in a related field). SUU reported that 60 percent of their 1994 graduates found employment (data did not distinguish between full and part-time in a related field).

Concerning the number of years graduates take to earn a degree and the number of credit hours they earn above the minimum required, the Utah System of Higher Education's 1995 Assessment and Accountability Report shows that graduates take about 5 years to earn a degree and earn an average of about 193 credit hours---about 10 hours above the 183 average number of hours required.

Our analysis of whether there are strategies the state can pursue to help high school students obtain the training and education needed to get a job without spending unnecessary time enrolled in 4-year programs determined that the state appears to be doing an adequate job of providing high school students with information about job market conditions, career opportunities, and educational alternatives. Representatives from the state's business colleges, applied technology centers, and community colleges visit every high school campus to provide students with information about their programs. High school guidance counselors assist students with information about the job market, career options, and educational alternatives. Computer programs are available at most high schools which match interests and aptitudes with possible careers. At the high schools we visited we found books listing thousands of career options and the educational requirements needed for each job. Overall, we there appears to be numerous resources on high-tech careers and educational options available to high school students.

Our review of faculty workload indicators determined that faculty workload consists of basically three components: instruction, research, and public service. Of the three components, instruction (credit hours taught) appears to be the only component that is measurable in terms of hourly reporting. Time spent in research and public service rely on self-reporting mechanisms. However, departments have developed performance-based standards such as the amount of research funding faculty members bring in and the number of publication they produce to evaluate productivity. In 1991, our office conducted an extensive review of faculty workload. For detailed information on measuring faculty workload, we refer you to report number 91-03.